

Romanticizing Ghedli

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Chapter 1

The Excuses

One of the greatest problems that the Eritrean people face now is the romanticized image of *ghedli* that most are unwilling to give up. If romance does kill a nation, this will be it. This is not a case of how a nation has come to kill an idea (I wish it has been so), but of how an idea is literally killing a nation.

The idea of “*ghedli*” (and all the paraphernalia that goes with it) has become so disproportionally heavy that it has reached an unbearable stage for the masses who have been carrying it on their backs for such a long time. This Frankenstein of our creation has developed such a voracious appetite that an enduring culture of martyrdom has to be created just to sustain it. One generation of youth after another are being devoured by this monster just to keep an inarticulate, fuzzy and discordant dream alive. And now, in its last days, it is in the very process of devouring the whole nation; *Shaebia* has decided that if it is going to die, it might as well take the nation down the drain with it. Yet, enamored as they are with their revolution, many Eritreans would rather blame anything else than *ghedli* for all the ills that is currently afflicting the nation.

Ironically, the only thing that unites those who hold extreme positions in the current crisis, and wouldn't see eye to eye on any other issue, is this romantic obsession with the revolutionary past, magnifying whatever was good in it beyond proportion, while discounting anything else that mars that picture. You find *Jebha* supporters reminiscing about “mighty Abbay *Jebha*” and “ade *ghedli*,” while minimizing or totally discounting its authoritarian, sectarian, anarchic, corrupt and dysfunctional nature that finally doomed it to self-destruction. Then we have *Shaebia* supporters who never tire mentioning its “heroic past,” while ignoring its totalitarian, isolationist, paranoid and barbaric past. But this romanticizing of the revolution requires a lot of denial for it to stay potent: mass amnesia when it comes to the past atrocities of *ghedli*, giving “make-overs” for many

“heroes” with dubious past, remaking of history to fit ones own purposes, creating myths of peace and harmony among the people that never was, claiming a national identity that has never coalesced into anything identifiable, coming up with endless excuses for endemic failures, finding scapegoats to play the enemys role, etc.

Similarly, nobody dares to fault the masses for the current mess in Eritrea. Given the Marxist overtones that still find echo in revolutionary Eritrea, the masses are never supposed to be on the wrong. Even *Shaebia*, an organization that has shown the greatest contempt for the masses, keeps verbally extolling their “virtues”: their resistance (“TsinAt”), their endless sacrifice (“tewefaynet”), their patience (“tetsewarinet”), their patriotism (“hagerawunet”), etc. And when it comes to the opposition, their favorite line is: “hizbnado izi mreKebe?” (“Do our people deserve this?”) In both instances, what they find appealing about the masses is that they sustained the “sewra” for such a long time patiently, paying a huge sacrifice in the process. Nobody pays attention to the fact that it is that very unquestioning obedience that sustained *ghedli* that is now sustaining the Isaias regime; there is something wrong with a culture that doesnt seem to care whom it serves. Notice how the supposed “virtue” of the masses is invoked circularly just to keep the image of *ghedli* well and alive; these two myths feed on each others misconceptions.

The abuser and the abused in collaboration

The great irony is that the two main causes for almost all the ills that beset modern-day Eritrea can be traced to: (a) the culture of abuse of *ghedli* perfected in “*mieda*”, and now applied ruthlessly and indiscriminately all over Eritrea, its cancer-like spread infecting every population group imaginable; and (b) the culture of acquiescence of the masses that has created a very conducive environment for the abusive culture of *ghedli* to tenaciously take hold all over Eritrea.

The collaborative task of keeping the image of *ghedli* pristine has been one of glues that has kept these two cultures in interactive mode for such a long time. For the first, the perpetuation of this myth has been the essence of its survival; and for the second, it has been a quasi-religious cause that has been synonymous to the notion of “Eritrea” itself. But keeping this picture pure requires a lot of illusion, not unlike that of magic; only this time, it is willfully played upon oneself. Not only does it require a lot of willful forgetting of what happened in the past, it also requires that one not see a lot of what is taking place in the present. As in all romanticized constructs, the good parts are inflated and the bad parts deflated, all to the peril of the masses. It seems as if the sanity of the whole nation depends on keeping the legacy, and hence the image, of *ghedli*

unblemished; they feel that if they let go of that image, there would be nothing left to hold onto. Hence the national amnesia to blot out the painful past, and the endless excuses to find scapegoats that would be made to play the role of the “enemy.”

In this collaborative task to keep the image and legacy of *ghedli* intact and pristine, the first step is to misdiagnose what ails the nation. If one is set out to save the legacy of *ghedli* at whatever cost, the first thing to do is to place all the blame for what is going on in Eritrea right now on anything else but *ghedli*. The culprit, depending on who is doing the finger-pointing, can be the old generation, Isayas and his few henchmen at the top, those who have “agame” blood, the PFDJ, the Woyanies, the US and UN, etc. The consensus among all of these disparate groups is that “*ghedli*” whatever each one of them takes it to be is not to be blamed for what is happening now in the nation; and if ever, very little.

And then, of course, there is this willful collaboration to forget the past. But this task of romanticizing and glamorizing *ghedli* by willfully ignoring the atrocities of the past is not an easy one. All that it requires is a little bit of digging up for all the skeletons of both movements to come up to the surface for anyone to see. So the legacy-keepers of both *Jebha* and *Shaebia* in the opposition camp are in as much involvement as the Highdefites in actively erasing certain damning events in the past and glamorizing their respective heroes (most of them with dubious, criminal past). But, as they say, a history that remains untold is apt to be repeated. If so, those in the opposition who are actively revising history for their own petty purposes are equally to blame as those who are currently in power.

Excuses and finding scapegoats

Let me now go briefly over some of the common excuses used by many in the opposition to exculpate *ghedli* and the masses by making others culpable for all the ills that currently haunt Eritrea:

(1) **A few at the top**

It has now become fashionable to attribute all the ills of Eritrea to a few at the top: the dictator, a few corrupt generals, some policy makers at the Presidents Office and some few criminal colonels at the middle. This lets-make-everybody-happy diagnosis carries the solution in its sleeve: take out these few at the top and everything else will be returned to normal. They forget that taking out the few at the top has been very

difficult precisely because nobody could make his way to the top as a result of countless entanglements at the bottom. So what one has to equally look at is the national malady entrenched at the bottom that has created a conducive environment for the dictatorship to thrive.

An enforcer at the bottom – an informer, a torturer, a cadre, a foot soldier, a fund raiser, a technocrat, a propagandist, a cheer leader, etc. – is as much to blame as the ones at the top. The fact that his reach is more constrained is simply offset by the fact that the likes of him, unlike those at the top, come in large numbers (and that, given the opportunity, he would act exactly like the ones at the top). But more importantly, this kind of minimalist attribution leaves out the multitude of true believers that really enable the very survival of the totalitarian regime. One needn't go further than the Diaspora community to see how this particular group of population is not only willingly supporting the regime morally but also financially. The “hizbawi meKete” that is going on right now is a good example of how those at the top work very closely with those at the bottom to pursue their repressive agendas. And then there are the resigned masses, who for one reason or another, do not want to take any stand against the government.

When this minimalist approach is carried to its extreme, the whole nation's ills are attributed to one man only, Isaias. The minimalists totally miss the fact that even the making of a hero out of Isayas has been a result of a decades-old collaborative work between *teghadelti* and the masses. The making of the Monster of Asmara didn't come overnight on its own.

But what is sad about this minimalist diagnosis is that it demands an equally minimalist solution. That is why we see most of the opposition preoccupied at tinkering along the periphery. Some want to talk to Isaias, imploring him to change, as if he has been in a listening mood for the last ten years. Some want to write a letter of protest to him, as if this hardened criminal is a first-time offender that needs a little bit of prodding to come to his senses. Some are still allergic to the phrase “regime change,” as if there is room for this unrepentant regime to get rehabilitated. Some want to “soft land regime change,” without having any clue as to how that could be achieved. Some are involved in petty projects of “sanctioning” Isaias only, hoping that their “precision surgery” will take out the top while sparing the rest the pain of protracted medication. Some are in the business of rehabilitating old criminals in the opposition, all under the name of diversity. And still others are in the business of endlessly reshuffling organizations and changing their names, as if semantic tinkering will do the trick. That all of these stances the opposition have taken so far have been epiphenomenal to the task of bringing about change in Eritrea doesn't seem to bother them at all; they are just happy in the noise they make, even if it finds no resonance anywhere else except in their ears.

(2) The ubiquitous “Agame” card

And then there is, of course, the ubiquitous “agame” card happily used on both sides of the isle. In both camps, one observes this futile but diligent search for the “true,” “real” or “genuine” Eritrean going on unabated. Blaming all the ills of the nation on those who are not “dekebat” has become the “patriotic link” that joins many in the opposition with the *Highdefites*. You can see this ugly, fascistic search for the “pure Eritrean” going all over the Eritrean-based websites. There is even one opposition website that, unashamedly, calls itself “dekebat.”

When the accusation comes from the PFDJ supporters side, this witch-hunting has a sweeping applicability: anyone who opposes the Isayas regime is not a “genuine Eritrean” and most probably of Agame or Ethiopian origin. For them, anyone who challenges the Isayas regime becomes, by definition, someone who is not “a genuine Eritrean.” Since this is done by definition, no further scrutiny is needed to confirm their allegation. And as to those in the opposition who are tirelessly guarding the “purity” of Eritrea, one of their main tasks is to obsessively trace the ancestry of every PFDJ higher official. Measuring how many pints of Tigrean or Amhara blood is to be found in these officials veins has become their favorite pastime. To them, Isayas does what he does simply because of his “agame” blood. The rationale for this form of denial is obvious; it says, “No true Eritrean would harm his country the way these individuals are doing. So it must be their “agame” heritage that is causing havoc in the nation.” Once this idiotic line of thinking has been taken, it is easy to see how both *ghedli* and the Eritrean masses would be exculpated from all the ills that afflict the nation. They would rather bury their heads in the sand than courageously face their demons as a people once and for all.

Sadly, this kind of misguided reasoning is what we have been witnessing in the debate on “*Awrajawunet* and Eritrean identity” in TV zete. Leaving aside the dubious premise that Eritrean identity is built on *Highdefites* identity a premise on which the whole discussion was based the panelists seem to agree on one ill-conceived conclusion: that it is those who “feel insecure in their identity” that are to be mainly blamed for the ills of the nation. Their implicit rationale for such an irresponsible statement goes as follows: those who are “insecure in their identity” can only feel secure of their belonging to Eritrea if everybody else is deprived of his or her *Highdefites* identity, and by extension, his or her national identity. And their equally misguided recommendation is to put the “origin” of PFDJ collaborators into special scrutiny! If this sounds like witch-hunting, it is because it is. To them, the tens of thousands of “genuine Eritreans” that actively sustain this evil government through their collaboration is something secondary. The primary culprits are supposedly those few with Tigrean or Ethiopian blood in their veins. The fact that the ethnic cleansing done on the Eritrean side has been so thorough that it has left almost no one with Tigrean or Ethiopian blood in the land doesn't faze them

at all. Such kind of willful blindness is the stuff out of which romanticized constructs are made.

It is clear from the above that many in the opposition are collaborating with the Highdefites in sustaining the culture of exclusion brought all the way from *mieda*, all to the detriment of the nation; for no nation on this earth would be able to survive the global world that is now in the making with this kind of claustrophobic state of mind. The isolationist culture that *Shaebia* wallows in finds its echo in the “uniqueness” of Eritrea that many in the opposition keep touting. The fact that the two camps are constantly feeding this ugly culture in the very attempt to achieve opposing objectives is of a minor point.

(3) In the name of martyrs

And then there is this most sensitive of all categorizations: that of martyrs. Almost all Eritreans be it from Highdef or opposition camp believe that our martyrs died for a “better” Eritrea. There is a double fallacy embedded in such a statement. First, it attributes wisdom to the dead that the living don't possess. It claims the following statement to be true: if those who survived it all had been dead, they would have been wiser (more patriotic, better democrats, better citizens, etc.) than they are now. Or, to put it conversely: if the dead have been living, they would have known better what to do and Eritrea wouldn't have been in the mess it finds itself now. But this claim is so arbitrary that it has no underlying logic to support it. Second, nobody can put his hands on what that “better Eritrea” that the martyrs died for would have looked like to them then. Many now want to attribute that a democratic Eritrea must have been the dream of our martyrs. But this belies all the evidence. There was not a trace of democracy in *ghedli* of Eritrea. The majority of the martyred, being peasants (and mostly forcibly taken through “giffa”), had absolutely no inkling as to what democracy looked like. The rest, the student body, was totally preoccupied with Marxism and its variants, and were in fact antagonistic to liberal democracy as we know it now. And if we push this search all the way back to the time of the “founding fathers,” like Idris Awate, where neither communism nor liberalism were yet in vogue, we find an archaic, feudal world where ethnicity, religion and the cult of the leader were the main inspirations. These feudal characters would not recognize democracy even if it hit them in their faces. If anything, throughout *ghedli*, what has remained consistent is the disdain that both *Jebha* and *Shaebia* have shown for the democratic process.

But what is worse, in this ill-defined revolution, the martyrs have become the final cause for perpetuating further martyrdom. If you ask many Eritreans why do the masses have to undergo so much more sacrifice, they will tell you “because so many have died for it” that is, in order to keep the legacy of *ghedli* alive. In other words, the means

the martyrdom of many has morphed into a primary cause. They don't realize how circular their reasoning is. A cause doesn't become a justification because you die for it; its justification should be established prior to the sacrifice. If all the reason we could muster as to why we should keep this nation of ours intact is because so many died for it, we are in deep trouble.

(4) **An untenable distinction between *Shaebia* and PFDJ**

There are those who use a semantic sleight of hand to exculpate *Shaebia* from the horrendous crimes it has been committing against the Eritrean masses. They say, "It is the PFDJ that is committing all the crimes, and not *Shaebia*." But *Shaebia* under any other name remains *Shaebia*. I am not sure what these apologists would have done if the EPLF had opted to keep its old name rather than its new one, PFDJ. Anyways, it is easy to see that it is the old leadership and its repressive apparatus and the whole nihilist culture brought from *mieda* that are now to blame for almost all the ills that currently afflict the nation. The fact that there have been few dissenters among *Shaebia* does nothing to change its identity; in its history, there have been many dissenters, and in all instances what has remained constant is *Shaebia's* ability to wipe them out. And, more importantly, almost every policy that it is following now has its roots in *mieda*.

What we are witnessing now is the exact replica of what had been going on in the fields, down to its minutest details: the ruthless "giffa" (especially of the poor peasants that had nowhere to hide), the proliferation of prisons (*Shaebia's* underground chambers of horrors), the draconian security apparatus that left nothing to doubt ("Halewa sewra" being its best embodiment), the killing fields of Sahel (the massacres and endless purges: Menkae, Yemin, "jasus," etc), its confrontational stance with any faction (*Jebha*, TPLF, EPRP, etc.), the bogus philosophy of self-reliance ("btsfrna," "bKlstmna"), its religious policy, with its untenable distinction between "old" and "new" religions (enshrined in its *mieda*-constitution), the paranoid glass through which it perceives the rest of the world a philosophy that informs its foreign policy (the encirclement mentality of us versus the world), the *ghedli* experience that is now being replicated in the national service (with all its nihilist underpinnings), the totalitarian grip under which the *teghadelti* lived (now imposed all over Eritrea), the culture of martyrdom that sustained *ghedli* (now invoked to sustain the PFDJ), etc. All of these are now being replicated to their minutest details from the blueprints kept in the murderous heads of Isayas and his henchmen. That is to say, there is nothing new in what is taking place right now; we only failed (willingly) to register the lessons of history - all to our detriment. In the after-independence euphoria, anybody who would dare point at these ugly blots of history was considered a spoiler set out to mar that romantic picture of *ghedli* that everybody wanted to have and hold.

On all of these counts, the almost unanimous silence of former *teghadelti* is also amazing.

Even those former *Shaebia* officials who are now openly working to bring down the Isayas regime have yet to admit any of these past atrocities; they are in as much denial as the Highdefites. In fact, their constant invoking of the distinction between *Shaebia* and PFDJ is mainly motivated by this effort to keep the image of *ghedli* (and hence, their legacy) pristine.

(5) Exculpating *Jebha*

For many in the opposition of the *Jebha* mold, the crisis in *Shaebia* is all they needed to make a full time job out of rehabilitating *Jebha* and some of its dubious heroes. But this sounds more hypocritical than the Highdefites task of defending *Shaebia* because, while the *Jebha* defenders do want us to remember all the atrocities committed by *Shaebia*, they do not want us to remember even a single event that seems to mar the image of *Jebha*. All this despite the fact that this organization, throughout its history, has inhabited the worst of two worlds: although it emulated *Shaebia* in almost all its failings, it lacked the focus the latter displayed in fighting the enemy.

But if there is anything that defines *Jebha* aptly, it is its sectarianism. This is an organization that was born out of sectarian motives, with ethnic and religious overtones; lived throughout its existence in sectarian squabbles (religious, regional, ethnic, linguistic and ideological); and understandably died as a result of its sectarian malaise. Its only half-hearted effort to reform itself in the 70s soon floundered because it was never able to distance itself from its sectarian past, all along having been unwilling to let go the sectarian leaders of its past. No wonder that in its ashes, the *Jebha* factions that have survived it have now neatly aligned themselves along the very fault lines that doomed it to self-destruction. Only now, having come out of their respective closet, they openly wear their religious and ethnic hats all the way to their EDA meetings.

The contradictions that *Jebha* supporters display could be seen everywhere: They have been diligently digging up all the skeletons they can find in *Shaebia*'s past (as it should be). But if you point to similar cases in *Jebha* – Falul, Suriyet Addis, Menfere, Rasai, and all other pre- and post-Adboha massacres – they throw tantrums. They love to criticize Isaias for every blunder that he makes and for every crime that he commits (again, as it should be). But not only do they not want to hear any negative attribution about their leaders, however inept, undemocratic, sectarian or murderous they were, they also are in the active business of giving them a post-mortem “make over.” They never tire of reminding us of the marginalization of Kunamas under *Shaebia* (again, as it should be). But if you tell them that in this marginalization, which has a long history behind it, *Jebha* played a major role, with many of their villages burned down to the ground, many Kunamas killed and their cattle pillaged, they go nuts in anger. Day and night, they never tire of pointing out the inhumane treatment of prisoners under the hands of

Shaebia/PFDJ (again, as it should be). But it is in one of the most shameful history of *ghedli* in Eritrea that *Jebha* summarily executed its Ethiopian prisoners at a time of its retreat in the late seventies. In this regard, even *Shaebia* didn't match this atrocity. I could go on and on: the horrors of giffa (which actually started with *Jebha*), sexual abuse of women (especially by corrupt cadres and military leaders), endemic corruption of the leadership, etc. all areas that *Jebha* had excelled well before *Shaebia* came to be fully identified with them.

Myths and lies

In order to justify this revolution, Eritreans have been accepting all kinds of myths concocted by *ghedli* without putting them under scrutiny. First and foremost, Eritreans must be made to believe that they have a separate national identity from that of Ethiopia. But this is not as easy task as it seems, for not only has one to establish what is it that differentiates Eritreans from Ethiopians, but also what is it that unites the disparate population groups within Eritrea into one identity. Hence the need for “*sewra*” to revise history and concoct myths that would show just that. Some of those concoctions are:

(a) That we, Eritreans of different backgrounds (religious, ethnic, regional, linguistic, etc.), have been living in peace and harmony throughout history, especially when left alone by foreign forces. This is totally unsupported with historical evidence. In fact, just the opposite happens to be true: the only peace the land came to know was when law and order was imposed from outside (ex: under the Italians).

(b) That there is such a thing as an “Eritrean identity,” the preservation of which has been the main task of *ghedli*. But what has transpired from past experience the pre-Italian history, the Italian era, the pre- and post-federation upheavals and the whole sectarian era of *ghedli* is that, in fact, no such univocal identity has ever emerged. *Jebha* failed precisely because it was unable to craft such an identity, and *Shaebia* simply repressed the fissures of such an identity.

(c) That the revolution in Eritrea is a case of the oppressed masses rising up against their colonizers. A closer look would show that the truth is much more complicated. The internal trauma that *ghedli* experienced from its inception until now can be traced to two wrong beginnings that could never meld with one another: the sectarian roots of *Jebha* with no unitary, progressive vision for the nation and the naive high school students movement (“*sheboro*”) something that should have been confined to the school campus turned lethal with firearms in their hands.

(d) That the history of Kebessa Eritrea is separate from that of the rest of Ethiopia. This probably is the greatest lie concocted in *ghedli*. To the contrary, the history of Kebessa is closely intertwined with that of Tigray, in particular, and with that of Ethiopia, in general. The revisionist history concocted to prove “ Eritreas unique history” by *ghedli* (and many Eritrean historians) is stunning in the scope of distortions that it undergoes.

It is obvious that this mass denial the excuses, revisions, myths, lies, “make-overs,” etc. we saw above is meant for us to escape the hard questions that we ought to ask: What is about us Eritreans, as a people, that has gone awfully wrong? What is about *ghedli*, in general, and *Shaebia*, in particular, that is fundamentally flawed? In a follow-up section, I will try to deal with the latter question first.

Chapter 2

Self-Preservation at Any Cost

There is this ugly justification that almost all revolutions use to exculpate themselves from the flood of innocent blood they spill: “The revolution devours its own children.” These sinister words are uttered not in regret or sorrow, but in justification of the revolutions bloody excesses. When this romance with the revolution reaches its most perverse stage, even the victims enthusiastically embrace this perverted justification, and stoically collaborate with their executioners.

When, in purges after purges, countless innocent people perish, what justifies their deaths is the survival of the revolution; that is according to this convoluted logic the revolution has no alternative but to eat its own children in order to survive. At the beginning, this is further justified by the greater cause it professes to serve. But half-way along its course, the revolution undergoes a unique metamorphosis where it unabashedly drops its procedural nature (as a process/means to an end) and attains an identity of a full-fledged, self-sustaining entity (as the end-objective itself) worth existing for its own sake, thus dropping its pretense to serve anything higher than itself. Once it has evolved into a separate entity that is, totally split off from the cause it pretends to serve self-preservation becomes the only reason for its existence. After that, no amount of blood of its children would satisfy its hunger until it comes to its inevitable end, for it aims at nothing less than out-surviving the very cause it initially professed to adhere to. When the revolutions sinister survival logic is pushed to its extreme, the whole nation is targeted as dispensable material for its sustenance. By that time, the revolution has come to a full circle: when it started, it was to serve the nation; by the end, the nation is made to serve the revolution. Both cannot coexist for long without committing mutual suicide. Such a revolution has been the Eritrean one.

The current existential predicament of Eritrea can be traced to one single fact: Shaebias

primordial quest for self-preservation at any cost; that is, its relentless attempt to stretch its lifespan beyond necessity, in the absence of any justifiable cause. If the end result of the struggle is liberation, then attaining that objective ought to have brought *ghedli* in all its manifestations to an end; *Shaebia* ought to have dissolved itself and completely merged into the civilian society. Contrary to this sensible resolution though, its preservation has become an end objective of the current game, displacing the original one, that of the preservation of the nations freedom. This relentless quest for self-preservation at any cost has now reached its climax, where *Shaebia* is at a deathbed struggle to out-survive Eritrea (odd as that may seem); obviously with suicide as its end point.

Shaebias evolvement into a quasi-religious entity partly explains its tenacity in stretching its lifespan beyond necessity. [I will say more on the quasi-religious nature of *Shaebia* in my next posting.] The main reason why religions have persisted with such tenacity for millennia is that they aim at an inexhaustible cause – an ever-deferrable objective one that is supposedly attained only in afterlife. Since nobody has ever come back from the dead to tell us of these ultimate objectives, religions have no worry of disappearing from the face of the earth as a result of having met their objectives. By aiming at an ever-deferrable objective, immune to any worldly realization, they have succeeded in inextricably tying themselves to the cause; such that, the true believers are unable to make a distinction between the two.

Political entities are not fortunate enough to have objectives that can be eternally deferred to afterlife. However, this fact is not to be celebrated, for the tragedy that is inbuilt in every totalitarian system comes from attempting to construe an ever-deferrable objective that is, a cause immune to any worldly realization. The misery that all communist states underwent for decades couldnt have been justified without the communist Nirvana of a classless society as an objective, one that theoretically could be deferred forever. *Shaebia* is doubly unfortunate in this sense because its long-time professed objective the independence of Eritrea – once attained, could in no way be deferred indefinitely. Ironically then, it brought the end upon itself. But that doesnt mean it would easily give up its quest for self-preservation beyond independence. It had to create a whole new context, where the whole society had to be brutally rearranged, in order to create a new “cause” that would justify its unnatural existence.

Most people would rather commit suicide than give up their identity simply because giving up their identity is tantamount to killing their “selves”. That is why people are most resistant, and most likely to fight to their last breath, when they are asked to give up their religion, their language, their nationality or any other attribute that makes the core of their identity. So is it with *Jebha* and *Shaebia*, which had always preferred to commit suicide rather than give up their respective identities, even as the demand for

radical change in their identities was the only way to attain the liberation of Eritrea.

If there is one thing that defined the Eritrean *mieda* more than anything else it is Jebhas and Shaebias relentless efforts to out-survive one another. Framed in terms of “identity”, that mission would be: to preserve their respective identities at any cost. That drive had always been stronger than the one they had to liberate Eritrea. So the latter mission, which was supposedly the primary cause for their existence in *mieda*, had always to be subordinated to the former one. *Jebha* chose, in the end, to commit suicide rather than give up its archaic, sectarian identity. *Shaebia* is in the very process of committing suicide rather than give up its dehumanized, alien identity. That is so even though suicide in both instances could have been avoided by letting the identity of the Eritrean masses be. Below, I will attempt to trace this suicide-phenomenon in three cases: that of the civil war, that of Falul and that of independence.

Civil war and identity crisis

Many have accepted a nave account of the last civil war that drove *Jebha* to Sudan, and have seen it as a war between brothers that ought to have been avoided at any cost. If that civil war had been avoided, I dont see how Ethiopia could have finally been ejected from Asmara. If both movements had made it all the way back to the outskirts of Asmara again, we would have seen the same stalemate we saw in the 70s. Even if, by then, they would have succeeded in driving the Ethiopian army from Asmara, it would have been the beginning of a full-blown civil war. I am not by any means approving that civil war. What I am trying to point out is the inevitability of the civil war as a result of that irrepressible drive the two fronts had to out-survive one another by any means necessary. In any analysis of that civil war, the inevitability-phenomenon should be taken as a given premise.

Lets ask ourselves: Why was the civil war unavoidable? Why was it impossible for the two fronts to unite? The simple and straightforward answer is: Because each of them thought it couldnt absorb the other without diluting, at best, or totally compromising, at worst, its identity. *Jebha*, for instance, was all for unity at the beginning because it thought absorbing *Shaebia* at that early stage, where it had relatively a much smaller number than *Jebha*, could be done without compromising its identity. But as soon as *Shaebia* began to get larger and stronger, it realized that it can no more do that without undergoing a drastic change of identity on its own side. By the same token, *Shaebia* resisted unity from the very beginning to the very end. Since it was their respective identities that they were planning to impose on a free Eritrea, it was stark clear that each could only achieve that by eliminating the other. But the identities that both

wanted to impose on a liberated nation had nothing to do with the actual identity of the masses (or with the “Eritrean identity”, if you will). So the quest for self-preservation of their respective identities had to come not only at the expense of each others identity, but also at the expense of the masses identity.

Nowadays, many *Jebha* sympathizers blame the demise of *Jebha* on *Shaebia* and TPLF. But that is a lopsided way of looking at the civil war. The attempt to wipe out each other was always there; success in doing that does in no way exculpate the failed attempts of the other in doing just that. All that one has to do is look carefully at the events that transpired after the “retreat” of 1978. In the two years that followed, *Jebha* hardly conducted any major battle against the Ethiopian army. This was a carefully calculated strategy, and has everything to do with its age-old mission to out-survive *Shaebia*.

After the 1978 retreat, Ethiopias strategy was simple and economic: finish off *Shaebia* and the rest will take care of itself. This strategy was well understood by *Jebha*, TPLF and *Shaebia*. That is, *Jebha* knew that so far as it doesnt instigate confrontations with the Ethiopian army, it was relatively safe. But the paradox was, at that time, *Jebhas* survival in the field was parasitic on the survival of *Shaebia*. It was not that the *Jebha* leadership failed to grasp that, but that the drive to out-survive *Shaebia* was greater than the drive to out-survive the Ethiopian army. Hence, when *Jebha* was “saving itself” in those two years, it was literally waging civil war against *Shaebia* without firing a shot. Its silent attempt to let Ethiopia devour *Shaebia* was not lost on the latter. *Shaebia* was no fool; it was only biding its time.

Many nave “nationalists” abhor the fact that *Shaebia* has used a foreign force TPLF in its war against *Jebha* (as if there is a code of honorable rules in wiping out each other!). They fail to see that *Jebha* was equally using a foreign force the Ethiopian army albeit indirectly, to wipe out *Shaebia*. The TPLF had a better understanding of what was at stake in Ethiopias *Shaebia*-focused strategy. It realized that if *Shaebia* was finished off, it would be extremely difficult for it to make it on its own. So the war that it conducted against *Jebha* was, by extension, a war for its own survival.

But the lesson we have to take from the civil war is that both fronts were primarily driven to preserve their respective identities, identities that have nothing to do with the interests of the masses. And in the case of *Jebha*, it knew perfectly well that it wouldnt stand the assault of the Ethiopian army on its own if *Shaebia* was finished off. Yet, the drive to out-survive *Shaebia* was so strong that it chose that road even as it would have eventually lead it to suicide.

Falul and identity crisis

Unlike the case of Menkae which took place at an early stage of Shaebias history, the Falul insurgency took place at the peak of Jebhas evolvment, and hence involved thousands of *teghadelti*. A look at how *Jebha* and *Shaebia* handled this major insurgency gives us an insight on how their quest for self-preservation led them to brutal measures that had absolutely nothing to do with the Eritrean cause.

Jebha of the seventies was undergoing a huge identity crisis. With tens of thousands of youth from Kebessa flocked to *mieda*, it had a hard problem absorbing them without simultaneously undergoing a drastic change in its identity. Many of the powerful *Jebha* leaders, and many of their followers, couldnt reconcile themselves to this fact. They were in a serious dilemma: They realized that if they were to out-survive *Shaebia*, they badly needed this new force. But at the same time, they thought that this wouldnt be worth it if in the end it would come at the expense of the old identity of *Jebha*; for, in the first place, it was the preservation of that old identity that was motivating them to out-survive *Shaebia*. As they were desperately looking a way out of this precarious dilemma, they thought they found a balancing solution in the Falul crisis. Let me explain.

Although Falul was no small movement in its scope, the questions it raised were not radical by any measurement. Ironically, the only serious question that the Falul insurgents raised was the issue of unity. They thought that *Jebha* was deliberately skirting the issue of unity by making a “pact of unity” with Osman Saleh Sabbe (a pact that had absolutely no teeth, since Sabbe was in no position to enforce it on the ground) than with its *Shaebia* counterpart in *mieda*. Of course, there was a lot of naivety involved in this insurgency because they were assuming that the latter would be earnest in seeking unity. Leaving aside the naivety though, this was an uprising that could have easily been defused if *Jebha* had used tact and understanding instead of brute force. It could have even turned the tables against *Shaebia* by putting it to test, for the latter would have never taken that offer seriously anyway. But the threat to *Jebha* identity that the leaders were worried about was not one coming from Shaebias offer the were dead sure that neither of them wanted unity but from within the *Jebha* rank and file. So why did the *Jebha* leadership finally decided to use force against Falul?

The *Jebha* leaders thought that the Falul uprising provided them with a rare opportunity to retain the old *Jebha* identity (an identity that they thought was undergoing fast change not to their liking) without at the same time weakening their army. They thought that if they could get rid of this rebelling group (a group they thought was not amenable to their designs) without driving away the rest of Kebessa fighters, then they could

maintain that precarious balance that they thought was essential for their survival without identity change. They were, of course, to be proven wrong. After Falul, *Jebha* never recovered. This was not simply because of the number of *teghadelti* involved in the dissent, but also because it brought back that atmosphere of suspicion that characterized *Jebha* in its early sectarian years. That is to say, *Jebha* died as a result of identity crisis; it never found a formula that would reconcile the opposite ends of its newly evolving identity of the 70s. As pointed out above, nowadays many *Jebha* supporters blame *Shaebia* and TPLF for its final demise. But this is not even half the story. A *ghedli* that had tens of thousands under arms couldnt suddenly vanish into thin air if it had not been already hollowed out by internal strife. What *Shaebia* and TPLF did was give a final shove to an already mortally wounded body.

Even though the Falul crisis had religious and ethnic undertones in it, that was not all that there was to it. To see that, one need only take a look at the flip side of the story on how *Shaebia* handled this crisis. You would think, given the similar demographic make up of this rebelling population group mainly students from Kebessa *Shaebia* wouldnt find it hard absorbing them. Well, think again. When about two thousand of Falul insurgents were cornered between *Jebha* and *Shaebia*, the latter made it clear to them that it would not tolerate their separate existence. Having left with no choice, they finally surrendered to *Shaebia*, believing that it is the “lesser evil” of the two. They were soon to have a rude awakening when *Shaebia* deliberately put all of them in the line of fire in the most brutal front it was facing then in the killing fields of the Massawa front. Why did it do that? For the same reason as that of *Jebha*: to preserve its identity.

The most sensible thing that *Shaebia* ought to have done is to disperse the newcomers throughout its army units. But that was too much of a risk for a paranoid organization that had carefully weeded out every single dissenting individual real or perceived from its force with the helping hand of the dreaded “Halewa sewra”. *Shaebia* thought, in a similar way that *Jebha* did, that it cannot absorb this huge force without seriously compromising its identity. The fact that these thousands newcomers were not simply *teghadelti*, but dissenting *teghadelti*, was the main reason why it was extremely wary of them. The question that it asked itself was: if the Falul insurgents were unhappy with a more lenient organization, albeit authoritarian, how likely would it be for them to end up happy in the totalitarian atmosphere of *Shaebia*? It thought that assigning them throughout its army units would be like spreading a deadly virus [remember that it had just come out from the most traumatic experience it had ever experienced from within the Menkae dissent]. Once it had assessed this threat to its identity rightly, it was uncompromisingly brutal in its solution, not only on how to isolate and contain that “virus”, but also on how to get rid of it. And if that could be done in the process of fighting the Ethiopian army, it would have killed two birds with one stone.

What is ironically tragic is that all those Falul insurgents who died valiantly in the Massawa front ended up in their executioners roaster of martyrs. For all practical purposes, these are the ones of whom we could undoubtedly say, “sighumti tewesidulom”. The way *Shaebia* handled the Falul crisis comes from the old books of tyrants like Stalin, who got rid of many of those they suspected through a similar process. The Falul group is part of that nave student generation that, with all optimism and good will, flocked to *mieda* in a futile search for that elusive “unity”, that common thread that would weave “Eritrean identity”, only to be wiped out by two regressive identities the sectarian identity of *Jebha* and the alien identity of *Shaebia*. The students input to “sewra” derived from this chronic uncertainty, where the margin of error allowed for the sewra to work was as promiscuously wide as it could possibly get.

Again, the two critical points to remember are: (a) that in the case of Falul, as in that of the civil war, *Jebha* chose suicide rather than change its identity, even as it was stark clear that only by changing its identity to reflect the evolving realty on the ground that the greater cause of liberating Eritrea would have been achieved; (b) and that *Shaebia* too was on that suicidal trajectory, only in its case it would be coming much later (now).

Independence and identity crisis

It was not simple coincidence that both *Jebha* and *Shaebia* faced their greatest identity crisis at the zenith of their achievement; for, paradoxically, success at that point could only be sustained by either drastically altering their identities or totally dropping them. It is no wonder then that in the case of *Shaebia* a full blown identity crisis came just after independence.

When *Shaebia* triumphantly entered Asmara, it had already evolved into a distinct entity, separate from the Eritrea body separate in its concerns, fears, needs, interests and aspirations with alien experience that estranged it from the masses, alien “language” that had no resonance among the civilian population, alien ideology with all its nihilistic underpinnings, alien values that mock the traditional ones and alien culture that thrives on negation and violence. Ever since then, instead of *Shaebia* melding into the civilian world, it was the civilian world that has been asked to meld into the world of *Shaebia*. Perhaps the whole tragedy of Eritrea can be traced to this forced inversion of the natural order.

Even though *Shaebia* started as a movement to liberate Eritrea, along the way, the self-preservation of its identity became its primary preoccupation. The genesis of this evolvment goes all the way back to its inception: the culture of violence from within

and without (its violent breakaway from *Jebha*, its subsequent mentality of a fugitive organization hunted both by *Jebha* and Ethiopia; its eternal vigilance against internal “enemies” of all sorts; the ongoing civil war with *Jebha*; the relentless assault of the Ethiopian army); the isolationist culture of paranoia and the mentality of us versus the world that goes with it; the evolvment of the culture of martyrdom and the negation of values that informs it; the lack of clearly articulated objectives with an amorphous “ideology” to guide it; a pervasive anti-intellectual climate and the death of dialog, even in its rudimentary form; and, above all, the overall totalitarian grip under which the *teghadelti* lived and fought. Once it has evolved into this defensive, distinct entity, it began to see the outside world anything outside itself as the OTHER. In the process, its mechanism for sorting out friends from enemies totally broke down. And consequently, that “other” necessarily included the Eritrean masses. This estrangement eventually evolved into contempt for anything “*ghebar*”. [more on this will follow].

People failed to see the distinction between the two missions mentioned above that of preserving the fronts identities and that of liberating the nation because of the fact that, in *mieda*, many of the tasks undertaken to defend the liberation fronts also happened to overlap with those tasks needed to defend Eritrea. As to the diverging points, they either paid little attention to them or totally ignored them. *Shaebia* was to face its greatest crisis with the arrival of independence, one that unglued this happy confluence for everyone to see.

For *Shaebia*, the years soon after independence were the years of existential angst. The cause for which it had existed was no more available. Thus, it was faced with two stark choices: either it had to totally give up its quest for self-preservation as a distinct entity and meld into the civilian culture, or it had to force the society to adopt its *mieda* culture; it realized there was no way that the two could have parallel existence it was either one or the other. But the problem for *Shaebia* was that the peaceful context of the after-independence-Eritrea was not conducive for the culture of martyrdom to flourish. To mold a society on an ideology based on sacrifice, one needs an ever-deferrable cause in the form of an enemy that would be made never to leave the scene. It was soon to find that role being played by its old archenemy Ethiopia and consequently, by “enemies” from within too.

When *Shaebia* initiated war against Ethiopia, it was primarily driven by its quest for self-preservation. Remember that this was not the first time that it was actively seeking enemies; it was only that it was the first time to succeed in doing that. The fact that the others refused to take the bait (Yemen’s leader was remarkable in doing that) does in no way erase Shaebias track of record in its relentless effort to find an enemy to justify its existence as a distinct entity. Another way of looking at this phenomenon is to see how it has used the border war as a rare opportunity not to be passed by, the same

way *Jebha* did with the Falul uprising, to reassert its old identity. This is what I wrote before on this subject matter:

“That is why recreating the *ghedli* environment, wherein such an experimentation would be freely and excessively conducted, became an obsession of this generation [the Isayas/Yikealo generation]. The beginning of this sinister task was Sawa, one that eventually culminated into war with Ethiopia. This war was not only willed into existence by Isayas, it was also happily embraced by his generation for providing it the perfect context it had been desperately seeking for to recreate the *mieda* experience into which it wanted to initiate a whole new generation. The extended military service which the Warsai have been subjected to for the last ten years is not so much a military necessity as it is a conducive environment for this sinister undertaking. ”

Even as this war came to be a threat to the very existence of Eritrea, it was the very context that *Shaebia* needed to be born again. Ever since then, the Woyanies have played the role of the enemy that is necessarily needed for the indispensability of *Shaebia* to “Eritreas sovereignty”. This war was the opportunity that *Shaebia* needed to turn the whole of Eritrea into Sahel; or rather, into *Shaebia* itself. Notice the paradox in the two pivotal events in the recent history of Eritrea: the birth of an independent Eritrea meant the end of *Shaebia*; the existential threat to Eritrea meant the rebirth of *Shaebia*. The irony is that, whether it fails or “succeeds” in its quest for self-preservation, the end point of this game is suicide. It is only that, in the former case, the nation would be spared and in the later case, it would end in mutual suicide.

The alien culture

The problem with *ghedli* experience (temekro *mieda*) is that many of those who have gone through it came to believe that all the knowledge they needed to govern Eritrea had to come from that experience and that experience only, and that there is little that they could learn from the age-old culture of the masses (or from any other experience, as a matter of fact). Shaebias mismanagement of the Eritrea-after-independence primarily comes from this simple fact. But this is not as banal as it seems, for to assume that the other has nothing to offer is to objectify it that is, to render it dispensable. But this estrangement of *ghedli* from the masses didnt happen overnight after independence; it had evolved into a full fledged “world view” in *mieda*, long before *Shaebia* showed up in Asmara. Let me look at one strand of such a beginning by providing an example.

I remember an event where a *Jebha* cadre was giving a speech to hundreds of villagers in “bayto” using a language that was totally alien to the people, one that was replete with

exotic components [and that was the norm, and not the exception]: historical “facts” that the peasants couldn’t make heads or tails of them, liberation movement experiences of exotic foreign lands and equally exotic foreign heroes (imagine what the “Algerian experience” could possibly mean to an illiterate peasant), Marxist hyperbole that even the cadre himself seem to have little understanding, newly-coined terms that are as foreign as Greek to the illiterate peasants all mixed with the street-smart Asmarino’s lingo. In the end, of course, not even a single peasant understood what was being said. Yet, the villagers, masters at survival that they had become, kept nodding their heads in faked awe and admiration, and even gave effusive comments that they had always ready for such “emergency cases.” It was only at a safe distance that they would make their true opinion heard, “wey halwlew!” The end result was a total communication breakdown between the two cultures, whose dire ramifications we are now witnessing.

The bottom line is that only someone who failed to know them (or worse, only someone who believed there was nothing to be gained by knowing them) would go on giving such speeches year in year out without ever questioning the wisdom of such acts. When giving a monologue is taken as dialog, it is easy to see how this one-directional “communication” would eventually morph into the kind of coercive language that it has developed now. That the contempt for “*ghebar*” started with denying him a language is only understandable, for that is the ultimate attribute that identifies man as a creature of dialog that is, as a human being; you take away his language, you take away his humanity. Once you dehumanize him, contempt in all its forms necessarily follows.

It is this contempt for “*ghebar*” [today, the word is used to denote all civilians] that we see today displayed by none other than Isayas himself, who of course, embodies this culture of disrespect at its worst. Think, for a moment, of the elderly mediators in their seventies and eighties who were put behind bars for years simply because they tried their best to reconcile him with his old comrades. Even if one disagrees with them or suspects their mission, who in his right mind would ever entertain such an outrageous act, let alone act on it? But once we understand that this monster is a product of this cultural void that has no respect for the norms of the society, we know that disrespecting elders, one that is totally alien to our culture, comes easy to him. However, this disrespect should by no means be seen as confined to one man or applied to elders only; it is rather a pervasive “cultural” phenomenon.

Shaebias disrespect for the Eritrean masses has no parallel in history; it neither discriminates nor knows any limits. There is not a single population group that has been spared from its contempt. All that one needs to do is compare its acts with those of previous government to see the alien nature of *Shaebia*. Let me provide two examples:

It holds all religions in Eritrea in utter contempt. It stops at nothing in order to bring

the main religions under its control, bans all minority religions and imprisons thousands of their followers, demotes and arrests the Coptic Patriarch and even conducts “giffa” of priests and deacons in monasteries. To see the extent of contempt that *Shaebia* has for the Coptic Church all that you have to ask yourself is when was the last time the last two incidents ever happened to the Church. Neither Haile Selassie nor Menghistu ever contemplated it. And when it comes to the forceful recruiting of priests into the army, it never occurred in the 1,700 history of the Church in the region! Even the Italians, who were aware of the taboo nature of this act, wouldnt dare contemplate it, let alone do it. Only an alien entity like *Shaebia* that has no mechanism in its head to differentiate between what is right and what is wrong would dare attempt it.

Now think of all the trauma the Warsai generation has been subjected to: the deliberate destruction of the educational system; more than a decade of slavery (which includes the sexual slavery of many women); a senseless war that killed tens of thousands and maimed more; an exodus of epic proportion, one that has emptied the land of its youth; etc. And to add salt to injury, their parents have been subjected to unheard of cruelties for acts committed by their adult sons and daughters. Again, to assess the extent of contempt that *Shaebia* shows for the youth of the nation, ask these questions: When was the last time you heard a nation dismantling the only university it has ever had in order to contain its youth? When was the last time the Eritrean parents had been subjected to such atrocity? When tens of thousands of the youth flocked to *mieda*, neither the Haile Selassie government nor Derghi ever arrested or penalized their parents. Only an alien entity like *Shaebia* that has no values whatsoever would ever entertain to take such steps.

One unmistakable mark that *Shaebia* lacks any inhibiting mechanism that helps it discriminate between what is right and wrong, good and bad, normal and abnormal or harmless and harmful is that it treats the weak and the powerful with equal contempt. It treats elders, Warsai and their parents, businessmen, priests, the Patriarch, Ambassadors, diplomats, foreign journalists, NGOs, UNMEE, neighboring countries and many others in a predictably similar and abusive manner. But this is not, as many would have us believe, a chronic deficiency of one man. As I pointed out above, this total breakdown of the discriminating mechanism took place in *Shaebia* long before it showed up in Asmara.

Conclusion: the deathbed struggle

The paradox of Shaebias suicide is that it is taking place in the very process of its quest for self-preservation. All of its metabolism has this ambiguity inbuilt into it. Let me

refer to just one part of its body metabolism to make my point: getting rid of its “toxic waste.”

As any separate “organic” entity that evolved to have a separate existence, *Shaebia* has to find a way of getting rid of the “toxic waste” built up within that would threaten its very survival if left long enough to do its work. If there is anything that *Shaebia* dreads, it is the wrath of the youth that have been put in captivity in the wilderness for more than a decade under the misleading name of “agelglot”. Even as it badly needs them in protecting it from the Woyanies, it takes them to be the primary enemies from within. That is the main reason why it has deliberately kept them away from urban areas and put them under the constant watch of the military. But it has found out that that is not enough. The “agelglot” itself might implode unless the “excess toxic waste” the disgruntled Warsai is occasionally purged out from its system. Hence, the necessity to drive the youth out of Eritrea in mass exodus of epic proportion. Without the mass exodus of the disgruntled Warsai, by now things might have imploded. Even though the ongoing lethal hemorrhage will eventually end up destroying the EDF, in the meantime it is essential for *Shaebia* to occasionally relieve itself of “excess” Warsai if it is to survive. Thus, the mass exodus has been the safety valve that *Shaebia* needs badly to let go of the excess pressure from within, right before it implodes. This metabolism, as in any other biological organism, neednt be conscious; conscious or not, it simply has to happen or *Shaebia* would die of excess “waste” accumulated in its body. But that only stretches its lifespan a little bit longer.

Shaebia is not only emptying the land of its new generation, it is also hollowing out all the rest of insides of the nation. Like a voracious parasite, it is devouring its youth, its economy, its security, its institutions, its humanity, its religion, its culture, etc. anything and everything that makes the nation. In the meantime, in its quest for self-preservation, it is living off the nation as any other parasite that lives off its host does. All that it knows is that it has to voraciously eat its host (Eritrea) from inside. The fact that the very body on which it is living off is eventually going to die as a result of the hollowing out done from inside is something that the parasite cannot bring itself to contemplate, for there is no other alternative to its means of survival. So *Shaebia* is doing what it does because there is no other way for it to exist else than through what it is doing right now, even as this will eventually lead it to suicide. It is as simple as that. The question for us is: how do we deal with this parasite before it kills the nation?

Originally, when writing this article, I was trying to show Shaebias quest for self-preservation by looking at its quasi-religious nature. But since the question of “Eritrean identity” was the most persistent one in the blog, I felt that I had to frame it in terms of

identity. In the process, I took out most of what I wrote in the first draft. I feel now that by looking at the quasi-religious nature of Shaebia, we can gain a different perspective to the problem. Hence the decision to write “Romanticizing ghedli – III” after this one.

Chapter 3

A blind god's world

The greatest freedom of all is the one that allows us NOT to choose when we are presented with impossible choices, for it is this default choice from which a normal life's infinite choices that make life bearable come, call it then the space of freedom or the place of disengagement. The default choice is the freely available space where people always fall back into from forced engagement to regenerate and recapture their humanity. It entails countless possibilities that don't collapse into already specified choices; their mere possibility, and not necessarily their actuality, is all that they need to be aware of to feel free.

No wonder then that totalitarianism relentlessly attempts to do away with the default choice by presenting us with impossible-to-decline choices at every juncture in our lives where even our choice not to choose is rendered part of that totalitarian game that aims at nothing less than the possession of all that is in our minds. The communists' ever-hovering threat, "You are either part of the solution or part of the problem," says it all. Under this condition, our attempt not to be part of either of these choices is automatically rendered part of those very choices that we attempt to escape from. Disengagement is anathema to the totalitarian mind; hence the relentless effort to keep us engaged in one forced choice after another. Our three-dimensional world is made to collapse into a continuous, one-dimensional either/or binary, where the system easily keeps track of the emaciated trajectory that each of our lives takes. Let me provide an example of such a nefariously shrunk world: "Sophie's Choice".

Living in Sophie's world

In “Sophie’s Choice” [the book/movie], during the German occupation, a Polish woman (Sophie) is forced to choose between two horrendous options that she couldn’t possibly decline. A Nazi doctor makes her choose between the lives of her two children, one of whom would have to be killed at the gas-chamber. Sophie gives up her daughter, sparing her son; a decision that would torment her for the rest of her life. But let me give this already tragic story an additional tragic twist that would render her dilemma totally inescapable: if she is unwilling to choose between her daughter and her son, it is not simply that the choice would be made by the doctor anyway, but that both of her children would be condemned to die. This way a third possibility is totally denied to her. That is, she couldn’t say, “You choose whom to take; I won’t get involved in this evil world of your own making ... my hands are washed ...,” and walk away from the crime. She cannot afford not to choose, for that would be the worst of the available options. If she is to at least save one of her children, she has to settle for one of them, that being the least evil of all the choices. Yet, even under such an extenuating condition, she cannot escape the fact that she is consciously sending one of her children to death in order to save the other. In such a nefariously crowded world, a person can do good to one only by doing evil to another, for there is no default space unoccupied—no place of disengagement—that one can retreat into safely. In such an evil world, a mother’s best intentions for her kids can be conducted through an evil deed only.

The signs of *Shaebia*’s abhorrence to the default choice were there from the very beginning; we only failed to notice it, albeit willingly. When the referendum for independence was conducted, if it was entirely to be left up to the people what to choose, then the choice not to choose between the two options presented then ought to have been implicitly there. That is exactly what Jehovah Witnesses assumed. But for a totalitarian organization like *Shaebia*, whose entire idea of freedom is encapsulated in the menu of choices it selectively provides, this goes against its very essence; the very idea of infinite possibilities harbored in others’ minds is something that it cannot tolerate. Many Eritreans didn’t care, at best, or were cheering, at worst, when Jehovah Witnesses were disenfranchised simply because they refused to vote. That would come to haunt them a few years later when that default space of freedom was to be denied to everyone else.

Shaebia, in its quest for survival at any cost, has now created a perfect Sophie’s world where all the choices available to Eritreans are rendered evil. This world was perfected in *mieda*, where the place of disengagement had been totally squeezed out of each teghadalay’s life. And this is the world that is being offered now to the masses. Back at home, to give just one example, parents are made to choose between their imprisonment and their children’s escape from *Shaebia*’s clutches. The same holds true with those in

Diaspora. Nowadays, the most conscientious supporters of the regime justify *Shaebia's* acts as necessary evil to ward off a greater evil (that of Woyanies'). The majority of the opposition also fall into the same category. Their reluctance to take any meaningful measure against the regime (such as the designation of the state as a terrorist one) has the same underlying rationale. In their minds, they are always weighing which of lesser evils to undertake. Neither of them seem to realize that they are trapped in a Sophie's world of *Shaebia's* making. As a consequence, neither of them are aware that the only way out of this trap is to destroy that world by any means necessary.

In Sophie's world, even the gods are rendered helpless, for whatever advice they give can only be among the choices available out there. What could they possibly advise a person faced with Sophie's choice? They would be as helpless as the victim herself. They can only flee from such a world, in fear of being trapped in a world of inescapable evil choices. We can then say that totalitarianism is an attempt to keep the gods out of this world. If so, it is indeed ironic that such an attempt can only be done by imitating religion itself. Below, we will look at just one aspect of *Shaebia's* quasi-religious nature in its attempt to sustain this evil world through a collaborative effort with a captive Eritrean audience.

The greater part of the quasi-religious nature of Shaebia is again postponed to another posting, "Romanticizing ghedli – IV."

A blind god's world

In that instant of a fateful moment, the Nazi doctor almost attains a God-like status. By uttering a single question: (a) he brings a whole new world into existence (the Word creates the World!); (b) he shrinks Sophie's world into a manageable one that he can fully control; (c) and he even becomes "merciful" by allowing the lesser evil out of the choices he himself offers to prevail. Notice that the power to create, control and be merciful are attributes of an omnipotent God. So is it with all totalitarian leaders, who are able to create a new world by politicizing every move that their subjects make, and in the process make themselves all-powerful, all-seeing and all-merciful.

For a true believer of the religious sort, no past, present or future evidence that would falsify God's benevolence would ever crop up. If something good happens to the believer, obviously it would be attributed to God's benevolence. If something bad happens to him, it is because God – in his fatherly wisdom – wants to teach him a lesson or wants to

punish him for his sins. And if anything inexplicable takes place, who is he to question the mysterious ways God is supposed to work? So, whatever happens to him, he will accommodate the contradictory evidence in such a way that God will always come out a winner. In the case of benign religions then, God's omnipotence and omnipresence is derived from interpreting already prevailing facts on the ground to match His benevolence (that is, the Word is made to match the World). There is no need to drastically alter those facts; all that one needs is create a semantic, non-falsifiable world – that is, a world immune to evidence – out of those already prevailing facts. But in its malignant form, when religions take a literal (or fundamentalist) turn, it is the World that is asked to fit the Word! [more on this in the next posting] In the process of doing so, the world is turned topsy-turvy, with all the horrendous consequences that follow such a drastic reconfiguration in the lives of human beings. Their lives has to be rearranged in such unnatural way so as to fit the literal interpretation of the “Word” that it could only be done by bringing much misery in this earth.

Like fundamentalist religions, totalitarianism demands that facts on the ground be drastically altered to find the tyrant leader (or the party) omnipotent and omnipresent. The slack that comes as a result of the shortcomings of blind tyrants in meeting the twin requirements of omnipotence and omnipresence will have to be taken at a huge price by the masses. That is, the leaders become all-knowing and all-seeing neither by attaining a perfect knowledge and sight nor by their followers benignly interpreting already prevailing facts, but by shrinking the world of their subjects into a manageably small one – that is, a controllable one (not unlike Sophie's world). Hence, all the misery intrinsic in such a system. So how does a totalitarian system that is necessarily blind acquire an all-seeing ability?

Let me provide an example: A blind man, with the indispensable help of his son, is preparing a dinner for some important guests. Even though he realizes that it would be impossible for him to prepare the dinner without the help of his son, he is constantly on his guard because he doesn't trust him. He is afraid that he may be gobbling down some of that exotic, expensive food as it is being prepared, taking full advantage of the blindness of his father. So the father comes up with an ingenious, but cruel, solution that spares the helping but does away with the eating: he orders his son to continuously sing loudly – without any stop in between – for the whole preparation time, hours at minimum. The ingenuity of the solution lies in the blind man's exploitation of a double-ambiguity. The first one is an ambiguity in nature: the mouth is where sound comes out and food goes in, one at a time; promising him an exhaustive result. The second ambiguity lies in the singing, where a normally positive phenomenon is perversely turned into a totalitarian instrument par excellence: a means of deception, deprivation and Orwellian information.

A totalitarian leader, by definition, is someone who never trusts his people. He is always at his guard, afraid of what the masses might do if left alone on their own. Normalization (that is, people leading their normal lives) is anathema to him, for under normal conditions he would be unable to keep track of the three-dimensional lives of his subjects. So he has to come up with a similar full-proof strategy as that of the blind man that assures him that they are not up to some kind of mischief. There are six main attributes that the blind man and a totalitarian leader like Isaias share that are indispensable to their respective objectives: blind, ambiguous, exhaustive, informative, abnormal and alert. Lets now look at each of these attributes in detail, always keeping in mind the role of the captive Eritrean audience in sustaining the Sophie's world of *Shaebia*'s making.

Blindness as a virtue

In the blind man's case, the cruelty of the measure that he takes is inextricably tied to his blindness. Had he not been blind, he would have achieved the same result with a less cruel means. This is because sight would have provided him with a more differentiating tool, a fine-grained one, with which to handle the problem without taking unnecessary human toll on the sighted victim. Similarly, all totalitarian leaders have an in-built blindness to human suffering that disposes them to take cruel acts that are only amenable to grossly differentiated "vision." That is, they can accomplish what they set out to do by necessarily going blind. They (and their parties), as in the case of the blind man, gain an all-seeing ability – an omnipresence – at the expense of their subjects. Thus, blindness is an indispensable "virtue" to their rule, for the iron-clad control that is essential to render their subjects "visible" all the time can only be attained through grossly differentiated vision that spares nothing. The paradox of totalitarianism then is that the leaders have to be necessarily blind in order to render their subjects visible. The pitch darkness that they engulf their domain with, as a reflection of their blindness, is a necessary context that leaves their victims vulnerably visible.

In "Sophie's Choice," the Nazi doctor becomes an all-seeing creature not by developing his sense of "vision" but by shrinking Sophie's world into a manageably tractable one that would be rendered vulnerably "visible" all the time. By confronting her with choices that she cannot escape, he has managed to render her world into an easily predictable one. So is it with *Shaebia*. It has to render its subjects' behavior predictable by presenting them with one choice after another that they could only decline to their peril.

The role of true believers is crucial in sustaining the blindness of their leader. It requires an equally ingenious ability in "not seeing" on their side. Since the border crisis, the

tyrant of Asmara has been hollowing out everything that is below and around him for the sole purpose of leaving himself the only pillar of security and welfare that the nation would be able to count on. Every powerful political figure, office, institution and, overall, the rule of law has been methodically discarded. The foot soldiers though shamelessly exploit this tragic situation to stress his indispensability, completely blind to the fact that this “indispensability” has been brought about by none other than the hollowing out process that the tyrant has been gleefully undertaking.

Ambiguity at their service

Both thrive in ambiguity. Every decision totalitarian leaders take, even though clearly directed against the masses, has to be done in such a way that it also evokes an opposite interpretation (at least, among the foot soldiers). The blind man hopes that any neighbor or guest who hears the boy singing will interpret it as someone who is happy or in a good mood. *Shaebia* follows the same logic, in that it deliberately creates an ambiguous context for every atrocity it conducts.

In case the deed is so obvious that it doesn’t easily lend itself to an interpretive ambiguity that could be used for vindicating purposes, it would require a new fact to be created in retrospect that would provide it with the necessary ambiguity. That “new fact,” of course, has always to come at the expense of the masses. For instance, when *Shaebia* was forced to halt almost all construction work in Asmara because it run out of hard currency, it desperately wanted a reason that would divert observers from this too obvious a fact. Predictably, it created a new fact on the ground: it went after many engineers, detaining some, accusing others and closing many of their businesses. The purpose behind this was simple: to create the impression that the abrupt halting of construction had something to do with the “sabotage” of engineers and not with its economic policy. A bigger blunder that required the creation of a brand-new context was the border war. When it set off a serious crisis within *Shaebia*, the tyrant has to invent a new crime – that of “defeatism” – to match the dissent of the G-15. The true believers who, up to that point, had adopted a wait-and-see attitude, were overnight relieved to find an ambiguous context they could use to vindicate their hero.

It is easy to see that this search for an ambiguous context is mainly motivated by none other than the true believers’ propensity to always search for vindicating circumstances. The search for a new fact to fit a measure already taken or a new crime to fit a deed already done is always undertaken with the behavior of the followers in mind. Even though the *Shaebia* foot soldiers give every cruel act that the despot takes a positive twist, the emphasis with which they defend a particular deed always depends on the

ambiguous context created. And when it comes to the atrocities of *ghedli*, the Eritrean public too has been voluntarily providing the necessary vindicating context through its romanticizing of the revolution. And that romanticizing is still going on. Feudal war lords that wouldn't recognize justice even if it hit them in their faces are now being touted as "heroes" seeking justice. We can thus see, again, how both – the public's opinion and *ghedli*'s world – keep reinforcing one another.

Leaving nothing to chance

Their approach is exhaustive; it doesn't leave any room for error. Notice how the blind man has ingeniously settled for the most strategic part of the human body – the mouth – irrespective of its human cost. Anywhere else would have brought a less exhaustive result. The same holds true of totalitarian leaders: they always go for the one step that gives them the most exhaustive result, one that leaves nothing to chance, irrespective of its human cost.

Once, I described this phenomenon where nothing is left to chance as playing-it-safe. The example that was provided to highlight the playing-it-safe phenomenon goes as follows: a king, who is pretty sure that a handful of parliamentarians are plotting to assassinate him, but who has no clue as to who those plotters are, plays it safe by killing all the members of the parliament – hundreds of them. *Shaebia* too leaves nothing to chance; the case of Falul is an apt example: it decided to decimate more than two thousand former *teghadelti* of *Jebha* who voluntarily came to join it simply because it cannot tolerate the uncertainty that would come from assigning them among its own *teghadelti*. The mere idea that these were dissenting *teghadelti* who could ferment a similar dissent among the rank and file of its own fighters, even as there was only a slim chance of that ever taking place, was too much of a risk for a paranoid organization like *Shaebia* to live with. So, naturally, it had to play it safe by eliminating them in order to eliminate a minor risk.

The fact that no one wants to talk about the tragedy of Falul – especially about the massacre in the Massawa front – for thirty years is a good example of how the Eritrean public has been an accomplice in holding the lid over this horrendous crime through romanticizing *ghedli*. Even though the information on this atrocity has been out there for everyone to see, people preferred not to deal with it in fear it would be too huge of a blight to the romantic image of *ghedli*. Thus, they paved the way for other crimes of equal magnitude to follow after independence.

The all-knowing leader

The means the blind man has chosen is unique in the sense that it keeps informing him about the situation he is most interested about all the time – that is, in a continuous manner; he can easily detect when a song is interrupted or has altogether stopped. The paranoid nature of totalitarian leaders also is satisfied with nothing less than godly omnipresence. They are always in search of the perfect means that would keep them well informed on the masses, all the time; they aspire nothing less than an all-knowing and all-seeing power. Hence, their pervasive security apparatus and never-ending loyalty tests.

All the loyalty tests come in the form of Sophie's choice, where the targeted individual is made a participant in a crime by making him choose from inescapable evil choices. The communists' "criticism and self-criticism" is designed solely with this in mind. It is not meant to be a constructive dialog, but a means of bondage that one can never escape from once initiated into the crime. In such an Orwellian world, it is not love, but crime, that would forge life-long bond between "comrades." Once one undergoes this horrible procedure, he finds himself at a point of no return – that is, he is rendered vulnerably visible. *Shaebia* was famous for this participation-by-crime phenomenon, where wives were made to inform on their husbands and vice versa, sons on their fathers, comrades-in-arms on one another, etc.

That climate of fear and suspicion that defined *Shaebia* in *mieda* currently reigns everywhere in Eritrea, where a neighbor is made to spy upon a neighbor and a fellow villager is made to spy upon his own village. *Shaebia* has created a huge network of participants-in-crime, whose tentacles reach every corner of the nation, thus gaining an all-seeing eye in the process. The horrors of the silent killing fields of Sahel are now being replicated all over Eritrea, where those who cannot easily meld into the regime's scheme are being "disappeared." Such extra-judicial executions have become so common that the Warsai have come up with a disconcerting new name to describe it: "atseghio'mo." Even though it doesn't valorize death the way the official phrase, "sighumti tewesidwo," it nevertheless trivializes it. That tells us that the nonchalant way Eritreans have come to normalize death for the sake of *ghedli* is still going on.

The perversion of the normal

In the blind man's case, notice how a normal phenomenon – singing – has been turned into an abnormal means. Similarly, totalitarian leaders are known for perverting most normal acts. In fact, normalization in any form is anathema to them, for it would mean

the loss of control over the population since it cannot be attained without the default choice in place. Their demand to know everything that goes on in their domains requires constantly interfering and disrupting the normal lives of people. Their omnipresence can be achieved only by turning the whole society topsy-turvy – if you will, they have to keep the whole society “singing.”

Let me provide a chilling example. Ululating is the most expressive form of joy in our culture. Under *Shaebia*’s hands though, this expression was turned into a callous perversion when mothers were expected to ululate when they were told of the death of their sons and daughters. Let me provide another cynical example: “diquan riti” (“shops of fairness”). Of course, there is nothing fair or just about these shops. Not only have they eliminated competition through unfair means, but they have also turned out to be the symbol of the regime’s ineptitude; their empty shelves have come to symbolize the deprivation of *Shaebia*’s Eritrea. This perversion of the normal has now become a pervasive phenomenon throughout the land: the slavery of a whole generation is turned into “self-reliance”; a war of aggression into “defense of the nation”; the mass murder of *teghadelti* (as in Falul’s case) into martyrdom; the self-preservation of *Shaebia* into that of the sovereignty of the nation; etc.

Hyper-actively alert

Even though the blind man keeps his victim in a constant state of activity, this would have still remained unproductive if he – the blind man himself – wouldn’t be able to mirror this activity with a constant vigilance on his side. He has to keep his ear at a high state of alert throughout the period of singing. The same holds true for totalitarian leaders; whatever we say about them, there is one think that we cannot accuse them of: laziness. Both Menghistu and Isayas are very much known for their hyper-activity. Their uninterrupted interference in the society tells us that they always remain in a constant state of alert; they can only thrive under a state of emergency.

Human beings’ regenerative power has a tendency to bounce back, albeit slowly, under normal conditions. And since normalization denies totalitarian leaders the Sophie’s world from which they draw their all-seeing and all-knowing eyes, they have to constantly disrupt the normal lives of the masses; hence their hyper-activity. But there is a silver lining in such a hyper-activity: it cannot be sustained for long. That is why all totalitarian systems have a short lifespan. This is not because the totalitarian leaders eventually get tired and are caught off their guard. To the contrary, it is because they cannot stop their constant interference that the toll reaches a breaking point – a point of no return – where it would be impossible for the system to sustain itself. *Shaebia* has

been voraciously hollowing out Eritrea in its relentless quest for self-preservation. But now the hollowed out Eritrea is too emaciated to sustain a heavy-weight like *Shaebia*.

Marching towards self-destruction

What is it about the nature of totalitarian systems that internally drives them into an inevitable self-destruction? Since it is the very same characteristic (or “talent”) that keeps them in power that also destroys them in the end, we can reformulate the question as: what is it about totalitarian regimes that keeps them in power? For it is the very ambiguities that they keep exploiting to make themselves omnipotent and omnipresent that finally undermine them to a point of self-destruction. There is nothing intelligent about totalitarian leaders. Rather, what all of them have in common is: they never allow any room for error, a state of mind that keeps them in a state of perpetual motion/action; one that invariably ends in self-destruction.

A man who uses a hammer to kill every crawling insect might be able to finally get rid of all insects in his home, but only after he has completely wrecked that house. In *Shaebia*’s case, almost all the steps it has taken in its survival game has this overkill method written all over them: it sends almost all the adult population – 300 thousand of them! – into internal exile to eliminate any possibility of unrest; it throws parents behind bars to prevent the desertion of their sons and daughters; it wipes out higher education to eradicate any possible dissent; it literally wipes out the merchant class and nationalizes any profitable enterprise (airlines, farms, fishery, tourism, the housing industry, etc.) to monopolize hard currency; etc. In playing it safe, totalitarian systems remain oblivious to the huge costs they keep incurring on the nation that sustains them until it culminates in their final demise. In their quixotic quest for the largest room of error possible, they exhaust (they devour) the very context that has allowed them such extravagance in the first place.

It is true that each step that a totalitarian leader takes further strengthens the chokehold he has on his people. But every other such step has a diminishing point of return, until it reaches a negative territory, and eventually a point of no return. As any other totalitarian leader, Isayas doesn’t give a damn what the consequences of his acts on the people of Eritrea turns out to be. All that he cares is to act, and act quickly and decisively, to avert any threat to his political survival. As for the consequences that invariably follow his acts, he will have to deal with them – in his usual scorched earth approach – as soon as they crop up, all at the expense of the masses. This creates a domino’s effect, for every “correction” the despot takes will require further “correction,” one that never ends until the whole nation is hollowed out and the final demise arrives.

For one step “forward” that the monster makes in his survival game, he makes two or more steps backwards. The fact that the lost steps could only make their presence felt in their cumulative form – hence, in their delayed form – shouldn’t be confused for their absence. That is why when the end comes, it seems total and abrupt, surprising many. But the installment for such a dramatic ending has already been incrementally paid for years – sadly, at the expense of the masses. Again, we reach the same conclusion: it is not the question of whether *Shaebia* will commit suicide, but whether it will destroy the nation in the process of doing so.

The report on Patriarch Antonios

The latest report on Patriarch Antonios posted in *asmarino.com* epitomizes the ambivalence and cowardice that the Eritrean public has displayed when it comes to the gross atrocities committed by *Shaebia*, in general, and Isaias, in particular. Throughout the report, there is not a single accusation leveled either against the government or the tyrant. Instead, the whole blame for the Orthodox Church’s predicament is laid on Yoftahe Dimetros, as if he is doing this all on his own. There is no doubt he is a despicable man, but nevertheless a little man assigned to do the regime’s dirty job. As any other official, he is subject to promotion, demotion, freezing, praise and humiliation under the hands of Isaias. He is simply a dispensable instrument currently used in the larger scheme of the tyrant. Yet, the priests and deacons who compiled this report, even though they are doing it from the safety of the US, could not muster enough courage and honesty to say anything negative about the regime or its leader.

They accuse Mr. Yoftahe Dimetros as one “who has illegally and by force of arms arrogated to himself the title and duties of a general administrator of the church,” as if he has his own private army. They notoriously talk about how he and his clique “undertook a coup,” while the real coup is no one else’s but the PJDJ’s. But most amazingly, they wrote, “The Yoftahe camp determined that such spiritual resurgence by so many young people in so many churches represented a threat to his position and left no stone unturned to make sure that this huge tide of interest by young people is stopped. To this end, he orchestrated the imprisonment of some of the most highly educated clergy in the EOC. Three-Four years later, they remain in prison.” The hypocrisy that lies behind this statement is obvious.

The main reason why the PFDJ wanted the Sunday School in Medhanie Alem Church closed was because it was alarmed of the thousands of youth that were flocking there. It was the PFDJ, and not Yoftahe, that felt a threat to its position. Anyone who knows the paranoid nature of *Shaebia* knows this. It is as simple as that. Yet, they go on

skirting the main issue and keep on blaming it all on minor characters. And when they mention priests in prison, it is as if Yoftahe has his own private prison. Even when it comes to the current condition of Patriarch Antonios, either they accuse Yoftahe and his clique or they use impersonal, passive language (such as, “His office was sealed ... his telephone and fax were disconnected ... His passport was confiscated ... He is under a strict house arrest.”), all the time afraid to point out who is doing all of this. I am sure the Yoftahe cannot do all of this on his own, even if he wants to.

There is no doubt that Patriarch Antonios is one the most courageous men in Eritrea to ever confront the Isaias regime head on. There is a simple reason for that: he was fighting back against the unsolicited incursions of the PFDJ into the Church’s domain. This, and this only, explains the current predicament of the Church. All the rest are subplots and minor details of this major schemes. So it is a travesty to see a group of priests write such a cowardly report in his defense. I am sure if he sees such a report he would be disgusted with it.

But then again such a cowardice has been the story of the Eritrean public.